



Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

February 4, 2010
1420 East 6th Ave.
P.O. Box 200701
Helena, MT 59620-0701

Environmental Quality Council
Montana Department of Environmental Quality
Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks
 Fisheries Bureau
 Endangered Species Coordinator
 Native Species Coordinator, Fisheries Bureau
 Missoula Office
Montana State Library, Helena
MT Environmental Information Center
Montana Audubon Council
Montana Wildlife Federation, P.O. Box 1175, Helena, MT 59624
Wayne Hadley, 1016 Eastside Road, Deer Lodge, MT 59722
Montana River Action, 304 N 18th Ave., Bozeman, MT 59715
Mineral County Conservation District, P.O. Box 730, Superior, MT 59872
U.S. Army Corp of Engineers, Helena
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Helena
State Historic Preservation Office, Helena
Trout Unlimited, 425 East Spruce Street, Missoula, MT 59802
Dan Gull, P.O. Box 395, Frenchtown, MT 59834
Lolo National Forest, Fort Missoula, Bldg. 24, Missoula, MT 59804

Ladies and Gentlemen:

Please find enclosed an Environmental Assessment (EA) prepared for the Future Fisheries Improvement Program. The Program tentatively plans to provide partial funding to a stream and floodplain restoration project on a 2,000-foot reach of Oregon Gulch that historically had been placer mined. Oregon Gulch is a tributary to Cedar Creek and ultimately the Clark Fork River. The intent of the project is to restore a migration corridor for fluvial bull trout to access intact habitat located upstream on national forest property and improve overall aquatic and riparian habitat. This proposed project is located approximately 7 miles southwest of the town of Superior in Mineral County.

Please submit any comments that you have by 5:00 P.M., March 8, 2010 to the Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks in Helena at the address listed above. Funding for this project through the Future Fisheries Improvement Program is contingent upon approval being granted by the Fish, Wildlife and Parks Commission. If you have any questions, feel free to contact me at (406) 444-2432. Please note that this draft EA will be considered as final if no substantive comments are received by the deadline listed above.

Sincerely,

Mark Lere, Program Officer
Habitat Protection Section
Fisheries Bureau
e-mail: mlere@mt.gov

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT
Fisheries Bureau
Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks
Oregon Gulch Channel Restoration Project

General Purpose: The 1995 Montana Legislature enacted statute 87-1-272 through 273 that directs the Department to administer a Future Fisheries Improvement Program. The program involves providing funding for physical projects to restore degraded fish habitat in rivers and lakes for the purpose of improving wild fisheries. The legislature established an earmarked funding account to help accomplish this goal. Additionally, the 1999 Montana Legislature amended statute sections 87-1-273, 15-38-202 and Section 5, Chapter 463, Laws of 1995 to create a bull trout and cutthroat trout enhancement program. The program calls for the enhancement of bull trout and cutthroat trout through habitat restoration, natural reproduction and reductions in species competition by way of the Future Fisheries Program.

The Future Fisheries Improvement Program is proposing to provide partial funding for a project calling for the restoration of 2,000 feet of Oregon Gulch, a tributary to Cedar Creek and ultimately the Clark Fork River. This reach of stream was heavily mined in the early 1960's, resulting in a channel that is straightened and bermed with a floodplain dominated by piles of coarse dredge tailings. Restoration would involve reconstructing the channel with a proper dimension, pattern and profile; planting of native riparian vegetation; placing large woody debris in the constructed channel and removing mine tailings from the floodplain. The intent of the project is to restore a migration corridor for fluvial bull trout to access intact habitat located upstream on national forest property and enhance overall aquatic and riparian habitat. This proposed project is located approximately 7 miles southwest of the town of Superior in Mineral County (Attachment 1).

I. Location of Project: This project will be conducted on a reach of Oregon Gulch located approximately 7 miles southwest of the town of Superior within Township 16 North, Range 27 West, Section 21 in Mineral County (Attachment 2).

II. Need for the Project: One goal within Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks six-year operations plan for the fisheries program is to "restore and enhance degraded fisheries habitats" by implementing habitat restoration projects and administering the Future Fisheries Improvement Program to restore important habitats on private and public lands. This proposed project would help meet this goal.

Oregon Gulch is a headwater tributary to Cedar Creek and supports fluvial bull trout in its lower reaches, as well as a genetically pure population of westslope cutthroat trout. Fluvial bull trout have been documented spawning in the lower reaches of Oregon Gulch since 2002 and this area consistently has produced the highest number of redd counts in the Cedar Creek drainage. However, a heavily mined area near the confluence with Lost Creek appears to prevent upstream access to intact aquatic habitat located on national forest lands. A patented mining claim located on a private parcel encompasses approximately 4 miles of the stream bottom in Oregon Gulch. The major disturbance created by past mining is located just downstream of the confluence of Oregon Gulch and Lost Creek. In this area, the channel has been straightened and bermed for

about 600 feet and 15 to 20-foot high piles of dredge tailings dominate the floodplain. The dredge tailings limit floodplain connectivity and confine the channel against a steep hillside. The upper reaches of the project site are seasonally dewatered. This dewatering is due to the loss of fine sediment that acts as a channel sealer as a result of past dredging activities. Past disturbances are creating a seasonal migration barrier to migrating bull trout. This project calls for restoring channel function by improving sediment transport and deposition, increasing channel sinuosity and pool-riffle periodicities, reconnecting the stream to the floodplain, as well as improving overall fish and riparian habitat.

III. Scope of the Project:

This proposed project calls for restoring a reach of Oregon Gulch that historically had been altered by mining activities (Attachment 3). Portions of the stream will be reconstructed over 2,000 feet of channel, especially in the heavily confined bermed area located on the downstream end of the project site. To the greatest extent possible, the new channel alignment would be located in forested or shrub dominated areas of the floodplain and excavation would be conducted in a manner to minimize disturbance to adjacent vegetation and floodplain surfaces. Sod mats, willow clumps and rootwad complexes will be used to stabilize the constructed channel and provide for increased habitat complexity (Attachment 4). The stream would be realigned to capture groundwater flow coming from existing impounded areas located in the floodplain to encourage surface flow connectivity. Existing ponds would be partially maintained as backwater sloughs for juvenile rearing and over-wintering areas. The extensive mine tailing piles would be removed from the floodplain and hauled to another location on the property to provide for adequate floodplain capacity and improve the riparian vegetative community. The project has been developed and will be completed in cooperation with the landowner, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks and the Lolo National Forest. The Lolo National Forest manages the surrounding parcels of land and road systems. The restoration project is expected to take 5 to 6 weeks for completion and is expected to cost \$134,200.00. Of this total, the Future Fisheries Improvement Program would be contributing up to \$65,000.00. The remainder of the funding would come from outside sources and in-kind services.

IV. Environmental Impact Checklist:

Please see attached checklist.

V. Explanation of Impacts to the Physical Environment

1. Terrestrial and aquatic life and habitats.

Restoring a reach of Oregon Gulch that has been degraded by placer mining would improve migratory connectivity and enhance habitat for both fluvial bull trout and westslope cutthroat trout. Habitat for riparian dependent wildlife also would be improved by re-activating the historic floodplain and by extensive re-vegetation efforts in the riparian corridor.

2. Water quantity, quality and distribution.

Short-term increases in turbidity will occur during project construction. To minimize turbidity, the operation of equipment in the active stream channel will be minimized to the extent practicable. The Department of Environmental Quality will be contacted to determine narrative conditions required to meet short-term water quality standards and protect aquatic biota (318 authorization). A 310 permit (Montana Streambed and Land Preservation Act) will be obtained from the local conservation district and the U.S. Army Corp of Engineers will be contacted to determine the need to meet 404 provisions of the Clean Water Act. The proposed disturbance of the existing mine tailings piles will not adversely affect water quality because previous testing has revealed that the composition of heavy metals found in the tailings reflect existing background levels from the surrounding area.

3. Geology and soil quality, stability and moisture.

Soils along the stream margin would be disturbed during construction of the new channel, but would be stabilized following proposed re-vegetation efforts. Re-vegetation efforts would involve seeding with a native streambed grass mixture, planting containerized native riparian shrubs and the development of floodplain micro-sites to encourage plant growth.

4. Vegetation cover, quantity and quality.

Riparian vegetation and cover would be disturbed during the period of construction. However, proposed re-vegetation efforts, in conjunction with restoring channel connectivity with the floodplain, would result in an overall improvement to the riparian vegetative community.

5. Aesthetics.

In the short term, aesthetics would be adversely impacted due to ground disturbance and the presence of heavy construction equipment. In the long term, aesthetics would be enhanced by returning a reach of stream degraded by past placer mining back to a more natural configuration. In addition, the riparian vegetative community would be enhanced by extensive riparian plantings.

7. Unique, endangered, fragile or limited environmental resources.

Oregon Gulch currently supports genetically pure westslope cutthroat trout and, in the lower reach of the stream, fluvial bull trout. This lower reach of the stream produces the highest bull trout redd counts in the entire Cedar Creek watershed. Westslope cutthroat trout are classified as a species of special concern in Montana and bull trout are listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act. The reach of stream proposed for restoration has a history of mining activities that have impaired native fish reproduction and created a seasonal migration barrier for bull trout. This project is expected to enhance westslope cutthroat trout and bull trout populations by restoring suitable habitat

conditions and enhancing migratory connectivity. Because Oregon Gulch supports bull trout, a species listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act, the project will be included in Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks Section 6 plan with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

9. Historic and archaeological sites

This reach of stream was extensively mined in the early 1960's. As a result of this previous disturbance, there is a very low likelihood that cultural properties will be impacted by the proposed project. Should cultural materials be inadvertently discovered during the project, the State Historic Preservation Office will be contacted and the site will be investigated.

VI. Explanation of Impacts on the Human Environment.

7. Access to & quality of recreational activities.

Enhancing habitat in this degraded reach of Oregon Gulch is expected to enhance angling opportunities on the stream and may improve recruitment of fish to Cedar Creek and the Clark Fork River.

VII. Discussion and Evaluation of Reasonable Alternatives.

1. No Action Alternative

If no action is taken, a 2,000-foot reach of Oregon Gulch would continue to be degraded, migratory connectivity would remain limited and native trout populations would continue to be suppressed. Riparian habitat also will remain degraded. Recreational opportunities associated with fish and wildlife resources will remain reduced and aesthetics will continue to be impaired.

2. The Proposed Alternative

The proposed alternative is designed to restore a 2,000-foot reach of Oregon Gulch degraded by past placer mining activities. Oregon Gulch supports both westslope cutthroat trout and fluvial bull trout. The intent of the proposed restoration is to improve migratory connectivity and overall habitat for salmonids, as well as to improve the vegetative community within the riparian corridor. This alternative would improve fish and wildlife habitat and aesthetics within the project area.

VIII. Environmental Assessment Conclusion Section

1. Is an EIS required? No.

We conclude from this review that the proposed activities will have a positive

impact on the physical and human environment.

2. Level of public involvement.

The proposed project was reviewed and supported by the public review panel of the Future Fisheries Improvement Program. The proposed project also will be reviewed by the Fish, Wildlife and Parks Commission and funding through the Future Fisheries Improvement Program will be contingent upon their approval. The Environmental Assessment (EA) is being distributed to all individuals and groups listed on the cover letter. The EA also will be published on Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks webpage: fwp.mt.gov.

3. Duration of comment period?

Public comment will be accepted through 5:00 PM on March 8, 2010.

4. Person responsible for preparing the EA.

Mark Lere, Program Officer
Habitat Protection Section
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Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks
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Helena, MT 59620
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MONTANA DEPARTMENT OF FISH, WILDLIFE AND PARKS
1420 E 6th Ave, PO BOX 200701, Helena, MT 59620-0701
(406) 444-2535

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

Project Title Oregon Gulch Channel Restoration Project

Division/Bureau Fisheries Bureau -Future Fisheries Improvement

Description of Project The Future Fisheries Improvement Program is proposing to provide partial funding for a project calling for the restoration of a 2,000-foot reach of Oregon Gulch, a tributary to Cedar Creek and ultimately the Clark Fork River. This reach of stream was degraded in the past as a result of placer mining, resulting in a confined, straightened channel and a floodplain dominated by piles of mine tailings. The intent of the project is to restore a migration corridor for fluvial bull trout and enhance overall aquatic and riparian habitat. The proposed project is located approximately 7 miles southwest of the town of Superior in Mineral County.

POTENTIAL IMPACT ON PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

	MAJOR	MODERATE	MINOR	NONE	UNKNOWN	COMMENTS ON ATTACHED PAGES
1. Terrestrial & aquatic life and habitats			X			X
2. Water quality, quantity & distribution			X			X
3. Geology & soil quality, stability & moisture			X			X
4. Vegetation cover, quantity & quality			X			X
5. Aesthetics			X			X
6. Air quality				X		
7. Unique, endangered, fragile, or limited environmental resources			X			X
8. Demands on environmental resources of land, water, air & energy				X		
9. Historical & archaeological sites					X	X

POTENTIAL IMPACTS ON THE HUMAN ENVIRONMENT

	MAJOR	MODERATE	MINOR	NONE	UNKNOWN	COMMENTS ON ATTACHED PAGES
1. Social structures & mores				X		
2. Cultural uniqueness & diversity				X		
3. Local & state tax base & tax revenue				X		
4. Agricultural or industrial production				X		
5. Human health				X		
6. Quantity & distribution of community & personal income				X		
7. Access to & quality of recreational and wilderness activities			X			X
8. Quantity & distribution of employment				X		
9. Distribution & density of population & housing				X		
10. Demands for government services				X		
11. Industrial & commercial activity				X		
12. Demands for energy				X		
13. Locally adopted environmental plans & goals				X		
14. Transportation networks & traffic flows				X		

Other groups or agencies contacted or which may have overlapping jurisdiction Mineral County Conservation District, US Fish and Wildlife Service, US Army Corp of Engineers, Montana Department of Environmental Quality, State Historic Preservation Office, Lolo National Forest
Individuals or groups contributing to this EA Rob Roberts, Trout Unlimited; River Design Group, Inc.

Recommendation concerning preparation of EIS No EIS required.

EA prepared by: Mark Lere

Date: February 4, 2010